

# Hacienda Luisita haunts Philippine presidential candidate Aquino

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With the Philippine presidential election taking place next Monday, leading candidate Senator Benigno Aquino III continues to be plagued by a controversy over his family's control of the huge sugar plantation known as Hacienda Luisita.

Plantation workers have been demanding since 2003 that the 6,000-hectare estate owned by the powerful Cojuangco family be subjected to the government's land redistribution program. The Cojuangcos have resisted using their extensive political influence, legal manoeuvres and outright state violence.

The election campaign has pushed the issue into the limelight. Like all presidential candidates, Aquino—grandson of the late Cojuangco patriarch, Jose Cojuangco Sr., and son of the late President Corazon Aquino—is posturing as a champion of the poor. Hacienda Luisita, which his political opponents are of course keen to highlight, graphically illustrates not only his family's wealth, but its contempt for working people.

Last February, in an attempt to shore up his pro-poor credentials, Aquino suddenly announced that the Cojuangcos were going to redistribute the land to farmers. As the plantation was heavily in debt, he explained, the estate could be carved up only after five years once the family had settled its debts. After that, however, the land would belong to the farmers “clear and free”.

The following month, however, an article in the *New York Times* quoted Fernando Cojuangco—Aquino's cousin and the plantation's chief operating officer—baldly stating that the Cojuangco family had no intention of giving up the land. “No, we're not going to,” he told the newspaper. “I think it would be irresponsible because I feel that continuing what we have here is the way to go. Sugar farming has to be... done plantation style.” Aquino issued a denial, but the newspaper stood by its interview.

Aquino's political rivals immediately pounced. Senator Manuel Villar tagged Aquino's promise as a “campaign ploy”. Gilbert Remulla, a Villar ally and senatorial candidate, lambasted Aquino for “hypocrisy and double-speak”. These

comments are completely hypocritical. Villar, who is also “pro-poor,” is a real estate billionaire and has been accused of land grabbing in two provinces.

None of this deterred the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) from allying with Villar and using the Hacienda Luisita issue to campaign against Aquino. The entire operation is cynical. The CPP, via its legal front organisation BAYAN MUNA, initially attempted to hitch its political wagon to Aquino's rising star last year, offering to support him in return for two slots on his senatorial slate. When Aquino spurned the offer, the Maoists hooked up with Villar and have provided a left veneer to his campaign propaganda.

On April 14, the CPP front organisations backed a protest by the United Luisita Workers Union outside Aquino's residence in Manila in a bid to embarrass the presidential candidate. In an extensive interview with *Bulatlat.com* last month, CPP leader Jose Maria Sison seized on Hacienda Luisita to declare that “Aquino will pay lip service to land reform, but will actually prevent it in so many clever ways”.

While branding Aquino as “the new puppet of US imperialism,” Sison declared that the billionaire real estate magnate Villar had “a relatively better program, which unfortunately has been underplayed during the election”. Sison did not explain why the program, which includes everything from land reform to respect for human rights and ecological protection, was being downplayed. It was largely drawn up with the CPP's assistance and Villar has not the slightest intention of implementing any of it.

Various Maoist and other ex-left organisations call for land reform but Philippine history demonstrates the impossibility of addressing any of the legitimate grievances of small farmers and the rural poor under capitalism. Aquino and the Cojuangco family are living testimony to the intimate ties between the Philippine capitalist class and the large landowners who dominate the country's agriculture.

Aquino's mother enacted the current Comprehensive

Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) in 1989, supposedly to redistribute large landholdings to landless farmers and rural workers. However, like all “land reform” under capitalism, it was premised on the defence of private property and allowed the landed elite to control its implementation. CARP developed into a publicly-funded program that helped big landowners transfer from unprofitable areas of the rural economy such as rice, sugar and coconut production to more profitable areas such as export commodity production, tourism, industry and residential development.

First, under CARP, the landless “beneficiaries” had to pay the government for land allotments and the former landowners were to be compensated by the government at a “fair market value”. As a result, only the better-off layers of the rural population benefitted.

Second, CARP allowed landowners to determine how they would be subjected to the program, if at all. Of the 3.6 million hectares claimed by the agrarian reform department to have been subjected to the program, more than 700,000 hectares, or 21 percent, were voluntarily transferred under nominal government supervision. The IBON think tank estimates that 70 percent of the transferred lands were actually parcelled out to landowners’ family members or loyal family supporters.

Third, CARP was aimed at promoting a shift to agribusinesses and non-agricultural activities such as tourism. The program deferred the redistribution of commercial farms devoted to livestock production and export commodities, and allowed land to be converted to non-agricultural uses. Between 1991 and 2002, according to IBON, over 304,000 hectares of farm land were converted to non-agricultural uses.

Fourth, CARP prioritised the distribution of public lands. By 2009, over 2.4 million hectares of public lands were distributed, while over 1.2 million hectares of private lands remained undisturbed. Much of the public land undoubtedly ended up in the hands of wealthy landowners, either directly or indirectly.

Two decades after CARP was introduced, rural poverty remains endemic. According to official 2006 statistics, 2 million farmers, or 44 percent, were poor. The government reported in 2000 that 45.2 percent of the land redistribution beneficiaries were poor. A 2006 study indicated that 26 percent had already sold their land either back to their former landlords or other wealthy buyers. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported that a majority of beneficiaries were unable to keep up with their payments.

Big landowning families continue to dominate the rural landscape. To list a few: Eduardo Cojuangco, a relative of Aquino’s, controls 30,000 hectares, the Floreindo family

11,000 hectares, the Almagro family 10,000 hectares, the Yulo family 7,000 hectares and the Zobel-Ayala family 12,000 hectares.

In 1989, the Cojuangcos availed themselves of the option under CARP of distributing shares. Workers took up the offer of stocks to the newly-corporatised Hacienda Luisita estate in lieu of the redistribution of 4,900 hectares of land. By manipulating the accounts, the Cojuangcos undervalued the land assets and emerged still in control.

By 2003, working conditions on the estate remained appalling. The Cojuangcos had cut benefits and mechanised operations in sprinkling, fertiliser dissemination and harvesting, thus slashing available man-days for casual workers. Regular workers had only 80 guaranteed working days in a year, earning just \$US3.56 a day or \$285.14 a year.

In 2004, over 5,000 hacienda workers struck to demand a daily pay rise of \$1.78 and the reinstatement of 327 farm workers and union leaders. At the instigation of the Cojuangcos, the Arroyo government stepped in. The state security forces violently dispersed picketing workers from the plantation gates, killing at least 7 people, including 2 children, and wounding over 121. A day later, then Congressman Aquino rose in the House of Representatives and defended the attack, denouncing the strike as illegal and blaming “leftists” for instigating the protest.

While Aquino’s record demonstrates the phony character of his current election promises to help the poor, the same is true of all the presidential candidates. They simply represent the sectional interests of different layers of the venal Philippine ruling class. Once in office, all of them would drop their empty pro-poor demagogy and implement the pro-market agenda demanded by big business and foreign capital. As events in Greece make clear, in the current global economic crisis that will mean a devastating assault on the social position of working people, including the rural poor.



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